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Briefe / Letters

zur 1. Diskussionseinheit / to the 1. Discussion Unit
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Axial Age: Terminology and Impact

Sehr geehrte Forschungsredaktion!

Im Mai 2006

Whenever they use the term "axial age", the authors of critical remarks to S. N. Eisenstadt's main article "Culture and Power – A Comparative Civilizational Analysis" (EWE 1/2006, 3 – 16) use it as a household item for a discussion of comparative culture. From the point of view of axial age researchers, this is certainly to be welcomed. However, for reasons of clarity, some concepts and contexts concerning this expression "axial age" contained in my critical remarks (EWE 1/2006, 31-34) to S. N. Eisenstadt's main article shall briefly be illustrated:

((1)) *Axial age* means that spirits and gods become confronted with (and possibly get subjected to) a worldwide good-bad ethics (and its societal and legal consequences, among others, for the conception of leadership in control of power). Historians roughly fix the axial age to the period between 650 and 400 B.C.E. It was the time of many religious founders and foundations: Zoroaster (about 630 – 560 B.C.E.), the Upanishads, Lao-tse, Confucius, Buddha, the synagogue during the Jewish exile, the Greek polis, etc. It is self-evident that the axial age by its essence (a non-tribal, trans-national and in this sense *secular* good-bad ethics) influences human society and its ideas of leadership. The axial age as described by philosophers and historians concerns the then known world, from Gibraltar to Japan. It is possible that another culture, outside of this "old world," experiences its own axial age any time in history or presence. Pre-axial age societies have become rare. To understand and to respect them is a noble duty of missionaries from other religions, and for governments from the economically and politically dominant cultures (Fikentscher 2004b). For societies, the dependency of leadership on belief systems is of utmost importance. It is here where, in the present world, the reasons lie for the differences of religions, and for the different societal, economic, and leadership models (Bernard Lewis' and Samuel Huntington's "clashes"). In my remarks, it was pointed out that it was the axial age that created the total (= world and life explaining) religions and the average behavioral patterns of their followers. This makes possible to draft that "concatenated list" of human societies and their appropriate forms of leadership and power control, taking modes of thought into consideration as they have been shaped by the axial age:

((2)) In *pre-axial-age societies*, the typical standard for good and bad is what is good and bad viewed from the tribal vantage point. Tribal people and nations frequently call themselves just "people" (Navajo: *dinee* = people; Inuit: *inuit* = persons; Germanic tribes: *dietz*, *deutsch*, *dutch* = people, etc.). Whether outsiders are people, too, is a problem (Bandelier 1890, 1971). – (a) *Foragers* (hunters, gatherers, fishers; Richard Thurnwald: *Wildbeuter*) collect from nature. Typically, they do not reproduce. 99,5% of their history, human beings lived as foragers. When a group becomes too numerous so that hunting, gathering and fishing turn unproductive, the group is ripe for a split. Government within these groups has often been described and subjected to theory. Consensus is necessary to carry on daily decision-making. Specialists will become leaders in their various proficiencies. In addition, there may be "big men". The position of big man is not inheritable and usually not otherwise transferable. The big man is appointed and dismissed by tribal consent in recognition of his personality and abilities within his "close-knit" consensus society. – (b) *Herders, horticulturalists, and farmers* reproduce and thus are able to save and to store storable produce. The importance of property increases considerably. The cultural step of being able to reproduce and thus be more independent from hunger is called the Neolithic revolution (Childe 1925, 1942, 1950, 1975). Usable land and access to it by trails become assets. With more durable property, there is wealth (and poverty) and influence (and lack of it). Wealth can be accumulated in family, lineage, or clan by saving, storing, marriage, or inheritance. Leadership will follow from wealth and influence, in pastoralist, horticulturalist and farming societies sometimes vested in the mother's line. However, wealth, power, and prestige should be regarded separately (Max Weber, see Eisenstadt, main article ((38))). Of course, they are interconnected. Lineage heads become leaders, and when lineages expand, artificial lineages, e.g. clans, gain importance, and with them clan leaders. Since wealth may stay on, wealthy societal groups arise, and with them aristocracy – matri-, patri-, ambi-, or bi-lineal. Lineages, clans, phratries and moieties grow in importance, as do the respective leaders of all these societal groups. Leadership may still be vested in big men, especially in early horticulturalist societies, because tradition may leave the institution of the big men unchanged. On the other hand, for demographic and territorial reasons, especially lineage and clan leadership may develop into chieftainship and inheritable kingdoms. – (c) The next "revolution" in V.G. Childe's sense,

the “urban”, is characterized by the start of separation of labor: Not everyone does everything anymore for her or his life support. There are now farmers, blacksmiths, tanners, potters, traders, etc. This induces separation of cities from the surrounding country side. Such centers develop into marketplaces which require a market police. The military, and its finance by taxes, add more power to the leading clan or clans, and their leaders may be called paramount chiefs or kings. – (d) In sum, pre-axial age societies rely on two tests for the identification of recommendable behavior: on consensus, and on big man or chieftain leadership. Foraging societies prefer big men, for reasons just mentioned. That big men are also to be found in reproducing societies, is due to an effect of societal inertia. The “urban revolution” with its incipient separation of labor would logically call for a type of leadership that profits from the “oversum principle”. It implies that the whole is more than the sum of the parts; because ideally now the professions have to cooperate. In mathematics, the oversum principle is called super-additivity. However, urban societies frequently stay chiefdoms or kingdoms. Comparable to the continuation of the big-men system in reproducing societies, societal inertia reinforced by simple fear of power prevails.

((3)) In *post-axial-age societies*, the culture of power and of its control is even more diversified. Childe’s two revolutions point the way of interpretation: There may even be talk of three consecutive “revolutions”, the neolithic, the urban, and the axial age. As mentioned, and put in simplified terms, the core of the axial age cultural revolution is the replacement of behavioral guidance by spirits and gods through an ethical standard of good and bad. Humans begin to mentally reflect and doubt guiding rules for their behavior independently from the supranatural. Pre-axial age “religious types” are defining the belief systems of single tribes or nations. Post-axial age “total religions” address the whole world. This poses two questions to human understanding of societal control of power: How does the disrespect of spirits and deities, the loss of animist awe, influence that understanding by promoting it to a new quality? What are the building blocks, if any, of pre-axial age society and leadership that may be retained, by societal inertia, in the new secular kind of understanding society and leadership although the axial age has brought about basic changes? The answers to these two questions ought to furnish reasons for the characteristic traits of post-axial age societies and their leadership and power control issues. At this juncture the differences between the thought-modal outcomes of the axial age become of decisive importance: There are two fundamental opposite solutions with which the axial age came up for mankind. One is the recommendation to get detached from this (ugly) world. The other exhorts mankind to stay attached to this world (however ugly it may be). – (a) For axial-age world-views which propagate *detachment from the world*, a new interpretation of human society and its respective types of leadership is essentially a non-issue: The world is doomed and has to be overcome. Therefore, as has been stated in the *Kritik*, post-axial age modes of thought recommending world denial *will be reluctant to replace* pre-axial age societal and leadership patterns by new models and ideals. They will regard leadership as part of the burden to be dropped anyway, and play down its human importance. Classical Hinduism and Buddhism in many of their directions and factions give examples for this attitude: Their thinking about society and leadership does not tend to produce new guidelines, but rather retain the pre-axial-age models, and maybe add to them a disinterested interpretation. Eisenstadt’s description of Indian (Hindu) civilization demonstrates this fragmented control of power by a diffuse culture. It should be added that this culture contains elements of pre-axial-age polytheism and post-axial-age world denial (“Bhagavadgita morale”, Fikentscher 2004a, 361). Confucianism, a basically sceptical look on human society and leadership as inevitable burdens, adds wise, practical, and mildly distanced advice how to abstainently deal with power. Thus, even after the axial age, predominantly world-denying or world-sceptical modes of thought often retain chieftain, king, or one-“party” leadership. – (b) This is, of course, different for *world-attached axial-age world views*. Here the consensus tradition is being confronted with a principled doubt whether the result of consensus is good or bad under an ethical standard that no longer flows from tribal, or national, expediency. Leadership by a big man, chieftain, or king finds itself exposed to the same critique. But what is the new standard to be? The logical bridge from axial-age ethics to decision-making is voting: Generally convincing tribal and national backing is no longer available. Instead, true and false, good and bad, right and wrong, become standards of general, comparable meanings. Different people may have different opinions about these judgments. A logical way to – world-attached – decision-making is majority rule: Majority wins, as was the rule in Greek city states, in some organs of the Roman Republic, and as it is reported by Tacitus for the (animist) Germanic tribes (“weighing of the votes” derived, e.g., from noise made by bouncing the swords against the shields). As to leadership, there is no recourse left to spiritual guidance. The reliance on majority worked out where the position just mentioned was transposed into a fitting societal frame under the secular influence of the axial age. Where such consequential frame-giving did not take place, post-axial-age totalitarianism followed.

The Greek polis and the Frankish pledge-of-faith cooperative provided for appropriate frames for leadership by majority. Kleisthenes’ democratic constitution for Attika provided for the *deme*, the popular assembly. Voting was introduced under the influence of the egalitarian philosophy of the Tragic Mind (Fikentscher 2004a, 355). As for the leading families, lineages and clans, a radical axial-age solution would have been to deprive them of power. But Greeks were no Jacobines. Leaders could be held responsible and accountable by the members of the city state. The Greek *polis* made frequent use of this device (in particular to keep possible tyrants at bay). In this manner, old forms were respected, but fundamentally remodelled under the impact of secular axial age ethics. Where the axial-age revolution took place but was not accompanied by the introduction of a value-based pledge-of-faith system, totalitarian leadership patterns which are based on “correct consciousness” were installed. My *Kritik* gives examples.

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Mit freundlichen Grüßen

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